DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 380 762 CS 012 046

AUTHOR Semali, Ladislaus M.
TITLE Teaching Critical Literacy across the Curriculum in Multimedia America.
PUB DATE 3 Dec 95
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference (44th, San Diego, CA, November 30-December 3, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Critical Thinking; *Critical Viewing; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Ideology; Multicultural Education; Teacher Role; *Television; Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS *Media Education; Media Literacy; Pennsylvania State University; *Social Constructivism

ABSTRACT

The teaching of media texts as a form of textual construction is embedded in the assumption that audiences bring individual preexisting dispositions even though the media may contribute to their shaping of basic attitudes, beliefs, values, and behavior. As summed up by D. Lusted, at the core of such textual construction are basic assumptions that include four postulations: (1) all media are constructions; (2) audiences negotiate meaning; (3) the television curriculum represents ideology and values and has social and political implications; and (4) the nature of media messages can affect social attitudes and behavior. For many people individual attitudes and world view about others seem natural and common knowledge. However, what seems so natural is actually learned from a person's earliest moments and becomes part of his or her social experience. It is not surprising therefore for teachers to take television for granted sometimes. They do not assist their students in examining its assumptions critically. A survey administered at a workshop on media literacy at Pennsylvania State University showed that most of the 20 language arts and English teachers attending were not aware of what they could do about media in their classrooms. Contemporary critical theory and media studies point out that the most glaring failure of United States schools in this decade is the failure to situate learning in its cultural context. (Contains a table of data and 12 references.) (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Teaching Critical Literacy
Across the Curriculum in Multimedia America

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Ladislaus M. Semali
The Pennsylvania State University
1994 National Reading Conference
San Diego, California
December 3, 1994

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
L. Semali
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

ED 380 762

With television, an event is broadcast or ignored: either it is in enormous headlines or it is no where at all. This power to choose what the great mass of people shall see . . . is altogether too great to be left to the judgement of a few television companies and to private arrangements made by committees and commercial sponsors.
-- Walter Lippmann

Many homes in America have a television that is turned on for more than seven hours per day. Individuals spend more time watching television than any other leisure activity and, cumulatively, far more time in front of the television than school; only work absorbs more waking time.

Furthermore, polls reveal that more people depend on television for news and information than on any other medium or source and that it is the most trusted source of news and information (Broadcast/Cable Yearbook, 1989; Gilbert, 1988; Roper, 1981, cited in Kellner, 1990, p. 2). As the quote above by Lippmann sums it up, audiences have no control over what they hear or watch on television, radio, or see in newspaper headlines. However, they have a choice to flip the channel or turn the page for more news to satisfy their appetites or to abandon what is boring. And even as their choices expand to include more shopping channels, commercial channels, real estate channels, and courtroom channels, audiences do not elect or decide what makes the news headlines or commercials of that day. Someone else makes those decisions. That is multimedia America.

CS013046

It is in this respect, that the media, particularly, television has become the nation's teacher of choice. In a discussion of the socialization effects of television, Kellner (1982) argues that television has replaced fairy tales and myths as the primary producer of children's tales. Even in present day programming, television continues to be one of the most important producers of myths and symbols in the society. He concludes that television has become a powerful socializing machine. Both television entertainment and information may well gain in power precisely because individuals are not aware that their thoughts and behaviors are being shaped by the ubiquitous idea and image machines of their homes (Kellner, 1990, p. 126). In a broad sense, this means that television provides continuous education throughout life, offering a popular day and night school for the nation.

One day in October 1994, after the US invasion of Haiti, the Philadelphia Inquirer published a front-page picture shot by Carol Guzy, a photographer of the Washington Post.

This picture captured the looting of a school warehouse in Port au Prince while the US troops looked on. The caption read: "A Haitian woman, clutching a sack of rice that is caked on her face, lies injured during a food riot at the Catholic school warehouse in Port au Prince. Groups of men fought over the food yesterday, attacking even women and children. Passing U.S. troops did not intervene" (Inquirer, 1994).

Troubled and perplexed, I wondered what the poor and hungry meant for my students. What images might this picture evoke? So I took this picture to my pre-service student teachers. My concern was how much did they know about the US intervention in Haiti? Did they know anything of the history of U.S. intervention in the Caribbean--Grenada? Panama? and now once again Haiti? What pre-existing understandings about America and the third world did they hold that allowed for their reaction to the picture? What role in forming those understandings was played by the mass media on this day, as on most others, was uncritical--even celebratory--of American military intervention?

I felt the need, more than ever, to understand the models of the Developing World and of cultural difference, broadly shared by white, middle-class Americans, that many of our undergraduate students brought to the classrooms and that I myself struggle with and against.

After much consideration, I turned to the examination of network news, particularly the visual pictures presented as one of the most culturally valued and potent media vehicle shaping American understanding of, and responses to, the world outside the United States. My interest was, and is, in the making and consuming of images of the non-Western world, a topic raising volatile issues of power, race, and history. What does popular education tell Americans about who "non-Westerners are, what they want, and what our relationship is to them. As any other popular media in America, the network news exists in a complex system of artifacts and communication devices: newspapers and magazines, television news and special reports, museums and exhibitions, geography and world history textbooks, student exchange programs, travelogues and films from Rambo and Raiders of the Lost Ark to El Norte.

Yet these diverse contexts are in communication with one another, purveying and contesting a limited universe of ideas about cultural difference and how it can or should be interpreted. To use television network news or newspaper photographs as pedagogical sights is to study not a single cultural artifact but a powerful voice in an ongoing cultural discussion of these issues. The history, culture, and social reality of North-South relations is primarily written, of course, in corporation boardrooms, government agency offices, and encounters between tourists, bankers, military personnel, and State Department employees, on the one hand, and the people of the Developing Nations on the other.

The role of a cultural institution like the Network evening news or the Philadelphia Inquirer and its viewers and readers, respectively, might seem small by comparison. But its role is not simply to form an "educated public," nor is it simply to mislead or err in describing those relations; it can also provide support for American state policies and for voting and consumer behavior (Lutz & Collins, 1993).

While a front-page picture of the Philadelphia Inquirer is seen as a straightforward kind of evidence about the world--a simple and objective mirror of reality--it is in fact evidence of a much more complex, interesting, and consequential world of reality. It reflects as much on who is behind the lens, from photographers to newspaper editors, and graphic designers to the readers who look--with sometimes different eyes--through the Philadelphia Inquirer's institutional lens.

A photograph can be seen as a cultural artifact because its makers and readers look at the world with an eye that is not universal or natural but taught to look for certain cues. It can also be seen as a commodity, because it is sold by a newspaper concerned with revenues.

The visual structures represented in the photograph, and the reading rendered by audiences, can tell us about the cultural, social, and historical contexts that produced them. An attempt to study visual structures leads us to the way in which meanings are offered to us and **our part** in actively making sense of them. It is important to keep in mind that the assumptions we make, what we consider as common knowledge or common sense, or "**general**" knowledge, or widespread beliefs and popular attitudes, are conventions we form as part of our cultural knowledge.

The fundamentally critical perspective I take on media and its social context is thus linked in a range of ways to deeply personal concerns. I am concerned with how to imagine and value difference, how to foster both empathetic forms of understanding and historically grounded perceptions. These perceptions emerge out of childhood and adolescent experiences and the choice one makes of adult work. My goal here is to bring a critical perspective into the ways media, such as newspaper photographs are constructed, to point out some of the prevailing cultural ideas about others through which any photograph of the non-Western world has often been filtered, and to raise questions about what could be done in the classroom and in the curriculum to develop such critical perspectives. This kind of critical theory of media must analyze the ways in which media images organize experiences and then attempt to specify their effects and deconstruct their linguistic discursive positions.

We must ask: How do pictures -- both moving and still-- create for us an almost palpable world of objects and events? As a young professor at a state university, I am struggling to teach about cultural differences in ways that are meaningful to undergraduates in the 1990s and beyond.

My teaching of media texts as a form of textual construction is embedded in the assumption that audiences bring individual preexisting dispositions even though the media may contribute to their shaping of basic attitudes, beliefs, values and behavior.
As summed up by Lusted (1991, p. 26), at the core of such textual construction are basic assumptions which include four postulations.

Firstly, all media are a construction. Equally, the school curriculum is a construction as well. Also, the world-view, information and perspectives created by both mass media messages and the school curriculum are primarily a construction of reality rather than reality

itself. In a nutshell, textual construction incorporates the way the media use conventions, how audiences make meanings from them, and how these meanings are applied within a cultural context (Lusted, 1991, p. 123). Such construction represents conscious and unconscious decisions about what knowledge is valid and valued.

Secondly, audiences negotiate meaning. While media content and the producer's intent are significant, different audiences respond to these messages in different ways. Similarly, the message and the method of presentation in our schools is accepted or rejected by students based upon their culture and needs including past experiences, racial, ethnic and socio-economic status.

Thirdly the curriculum represents ideology and values and has social and political implications. Mass media messages are based on assumptions of truth and affect social and political behavior in a variety of ways. Rather than representing equality of opportunity or principles of equity, the content, organization, culture and climate of both education and the mass media as institutions privilege certain sectors of society while ignoring or marginalizing others. This can happen in the frequency of representations / responsiveness, or in the nature and quality of these representations and responses.

Fourthly, the nature of media messages can affect social attitudes and behavior. Equally, the nature of the curriculum both plain and hidden, can affect social attitudes and behavior. For example, the self-esteem of minority audiences or students can be affected by negative representations. Such representations can also affect perceptions of majority students toward minorities.

For many people, individual attitudes, and worldview about others seems natural and common knowledge. What seems so natural is actually learned from our earliest moments and becomes part of our social experience. It is not surprising therefore for teachers to take television for granted sometimes. Today viewers everywhere tend to accept it as a window on the world, and to watch it for hours each day. Viewers feel that they understand, from television alone, what is going on in the world. They unconsciously look to it for guidance as to what is important, good, and desirable, and what is not. It has tended to displace or overwhelm other influences such as newspapers, school, and church. Thus, television has become our constant companion, in the home, in the hotel room, in the hospital--educating and entertaining us from the nursery school to the nursing home.

But as television and other electronic media grow in importance, social problems in America have grown proportionately. Although critics do not claim a cause and effect relationship, they have by and large accepted the proposition that violence, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy, result from a media culture that celebrates consumerism and instant gratification while tolerating undercurrents of prejudice and bigatory.

Author Richard Louv quipped, "Television hijacks so many parts of our brain, that it leaves little room for self-generated images and ideas . . . Television is simply a thief of time--of creative time, of family time" (cited in Aronson, 1994, p. 29).

In the span of a lifetime, television and other electronic media have replaced print as the primary medium by which we tell our stories, report our news and decide on our purchases--and our votes, particularly in an election year. It has become the definer and transmitter of a society's values (Barnouw, 1966, cited in Kellner, 1990).

Time has come for educators no longer to consider television and other non-print media as the enemy, thief of time or the ubiquitous bubble. Students feel the onslaught of the information age even more acutely than their teachers and are less capable of coping with its demands and of making sense of the complex world it presents. Teachers can help their students cope with this complexity by suggesting analytical frameworks and perspectives for sorting out and thinking critically about them.

Teachers as Critics

Teachers in many school districts in Pennsylvania, and to a large extent in the nation, pay little attention to television, perhaps because they accept TV, like most of us to, as a given. The burgeoning media literacy movement which is seeking to change the relationship between the media and educators and to engage students in a critical analysis of television images and other mass media messages has not caught up in many Pennsylvania schools. In assessing the level of critical media awareness, a group of 20 teachers attending a media literacy workshop at the Pennsylvania State University last summer, voiced their opinions when asked to rate the frequency with which they undertook certain core critical media literacy activities. On a scale from 1-5, the teachers indicated how often they undertook these core activities in their classrooms ranging from never, not very often sometimes, often, to very often. The mean scores of their ratings are given in Table 1.

The teachers gave a high mean rating of 4.32 to activities that support local media outlets, followed by a rating of 4.17 to indicate that in fact they choose media experiences which they wish to watch or be exposed to. Even though teachers indicated that they often seek out alternative sources for news and information, there were no indications as to what these alternatives were.

The data revealed that teachers did not write to advertisers or TV stations or media producers to comment on programming or to express their opinions about bias or stereotypical programs. Activities engaging their students in the production of media were non-existent. These results, even though limited in scope are seminal in understanding how teachers view the media and whether they apply critical practice in their classrooms.

The overall picture shows that the teachers who participated in the workshop were not aware of what they could do about media in their language arts classrooms. Furthermore, nonprint media, especially those that are part of students' everyday lives, are still considered as isolated phenomena in schools.

Contemporary critical theory and media studies point out that the most glaring failure of US schools in this decade is the failure to situate learning in its cultural context and

instead have given weights of canon-blessed works instead of giving "literature wings" and letting it go into the world (Griest, 1992, p. 15). Many English teachers, for example, still teach literature and literacy (reading) as if television and motion pictures did not exist. They go on performing as good citizens of the sovereign word, professing allegiance to written composition as the central form of communication in an age in which it has become common practice to join blocks of text with electronic links and add sound, images, video and other forms of data--an age in which it is getting increasingly difficult to separate textual literacy from visual, computer, or media literacy. What we are still missing from the school canon are examples of the literary genres of our times: films, television series, serialized drama, all of which provide their own versions of the best of human expression and aesthetic experience. Alvin Kernan (1990, p. 201) provides an insightful comment of this in The Death of Literature. He says:

> . . . literature is disappearing into another category of reality where it is becoming only one technique for written communication, one among many ways, oral, pictorial, schematic, and many modes, print, television, radio, VCR, cassette, record, and CD, by which information can be assembled, organized, and transmitted effectively.

These new media provide their own criticism of life. They are for Barbara Tothrow, who leads classes in video production and media literacy at Alvirne High School in Alvirne, N.H., the new accent of the English curriculum. "It makes sense to teach our kids how to read this medium just as critically as we have traditionally taught them to read print" (Sorenson, 1988, p. 42).

As educators, we can no longer ignore the fact that increasingly, nonprint media -- including television, music, video, videotape, film, radio, compact disk, and hypertext for personal computers -- have become primary sources of information and recreation, as well as emotional and artistic experiences for Americans. Efforts like the teachers' workshop last summer or the regional workshops sponsored by Newspapers In Education (NIE) group for teachers to learn how to use the newspaper to teach students how to deconstruct newspaper messages, can be a wonderful opportunity to develop students' critical awareness in the media and how the media represent people. In an attempt to forge new ways of integrating popular media across the curriculum, the summer workshop alluded to above, outlined areas of media literacy that could help teachers make a difference in English or language arts classrooms.

The workshop encouraged these teachers to join the estimated 3,500 teachers nationwide committed to work towards integrating forms of media literacy into their teaching. The workshop covered four areas: (1) analyzing codes and conventions of language, (2) analyzing personal pleasure, understandings, and experience, (3) analyzing cultural, ideological meanings, (4) analyzing commercial overtones and economic strategies.

Borrowing from the field of semiotics, one area of study that is essential to understanding contemporary criticism, is that all texts are **constructed** through language. To many teachers and students, texts, like weekly television programs, newspaper articles or pictures like the one described above, might seem simple and obvious reflections of reality; but when teachers and students begin to read them critically (and deconstruct them as languages), they begin to understand them in a new light: as complex, technical constructions or representations of reality, not reality itself. What they may have often sensed, then, as "realistic" might more accurately be described as their familiarity with the codes and conventions of the language used to construct imagery.

Because of the dearth of media literacy awareness in classrooms, it is not surprising to find youngsters who study literacy and literature for 12 years and still graduate naive about the techniques and devices used to capture their attention and imagination, about the cultural codes. These devices reflect and shape their thinking in their electronic literature. A lack of understanding of such devices is an important omission. Simply, they have not been taught to be critics.

Inasmuch as today's children come to school from homes and communities which provide them with wide exposure to nonprint media, it is crucial that literacy education teachers draw upon this background, both to recognize the students' knowledge and to develop the students' critical thinking about nonprint media.

It is in this respect therefore that students must develop the knowledge, critical awareness and technical skills to become participants in, creators of, thinkers about, and commentators on, the nonprint media that are so pervasive an influence on their lives (Aronson, 1994, p. 31).

This means that teachers often must use materials that, while potentially controversial, need to be examined so students can confront the stereotyping, the deluge of propaganda, and editorial gatekeeping so prevalent in the media. Such study will allow students to discover how nonprint media works are indeed constructions of reality that have commercial, ideological and value messages.

References

Aronson, D. (1994). Teachers are asking students to take a hard look at what tv tells them about the world. Teaching Tolerance, Fall 1994. pp. --

Barnouw, E. (1966). A tower of Babel. New York: Oxford University Press.

Broadcast/Cable Yearbook (1989) New York: Broadcasting

Gilbert, D. (1988). Compendium of public opinion. New York: Facts on File.

Griest, G. (1992). English in its postmodern circumstances: reading, writing, and goggle roving. English Journal,81(7).

Kellner, D. (1990). Television and the crisis of democracy. Boulder, Co.: Westview Press.

Kellner, D. (1982). Television myth and ritual. Praxis, 6.

Kernan, A. (1990). The death of Literature. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lusted, D. (1991). The media studies book. A guide for teachers. New York: Routledge.

Lutz, C. and Collins, J. (1993). Reading National Geography. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press..

Philadelphia Inquirer, Wednesday, September 28, 1994.

Roper, B. (1981). Evolving public attitudes toward television and other mass media 1959-1980. New York: Television Information Office.

TABLE 1
Teachers Ratings on Media Practice in the Classroom

	STATEMENT	Mean Rating
1.	I talk to my students, friends and colleagues about the media and its social and political influence.	2.83
2.	I no longer just turn on the TV or a video game; rather, I deliberately choose media experiences to which I want to be exposed.	4.17
3.	I seek out alternative sources for news and information.	4.11
4.	I teach my students critical viewing of television programs; thus enable them to detect bias or stereotypes of gender, race and ethnicity.	2.50
5.	I can readily identify common techniques used by advertisers to convince us to buy products, thus becoming less responsive to those techniques.	3.53
6.	I support smaller, local media outlets (newspapers, magazines, cable channels, radio, etc.).	4.32
7.	I create media experiences (videotapes, audio tapes, newsletters) that express my own viewpoints.	0.0
8.	I help my students identify needs the mass media fill in their own lives so that they begin to pick and use the media to meet those needs more effectively.	2.11
9.	I write letters to advertisers, TV stations, radio deejays, sitcom producers.	1.63
10.	I help my students to question the role advertising plays in fueling the consumer lifestyle, perhaps beginning to consume less and thus live more responsibly.	2.47